

## Louise Fresco, the Idealist – A short Q&A

Fiction is the best way for Louise O. Fresco to explore issues having to do with such things as social responsibility or the dilemmas of choice. Engaging in sustainable development in an international context, Fresco will take part at discussions about ‘Genetics in Agriculture and the Environment’ during the Nobel Week Dialogue (2A). She kindly answered some questions before.

**Q:** You are writing novels, books, columns, give TED talks and interviews. The NRC Handelsblad commented to your novel ‘The Garden of the Sultan of Rome’: ‘It is a miracle that someone with a social top function such as Louise O. Fresco has found time to create such a rich, versatile and well-written novel’. Other scientists and people in such top positions often argue, they don’t have the time for communication. What drives you to communicate in so many ways?

**Louise Fresco:** For me communication is essential, as a scientist and as a thinker at large. I have always written and worked closely with TV and radio because I am convinced that we only shape our ideas through communicating with others, forcing ourselves to say exactly what we mean and listening to others. Communication is an integral part of the thought process for me. Communication brings discipline, as you cannot just remain in the “send mode”. I originally started as a literary critic, because I liked the strict format of formulating my opinions within the framework of someone else’s writings. Finally, I write novels because I believe certain issues, in particular having to do with social responsibility and the dilemmas of choice, can best be explored through fiction. Now that my “big” book called *Hamburgers in Páradise* is completed, my latest project, by the way, is a series of documentaries on food, tradition and modernity.

**Q:** May one say you are some kind of a lobbyist? Wanting to combat hunger, unnecessary land consumption or the decrease of biodiversity and more?

**Louise Fresco:** I prefer to call myself an idealist as the word lobbyist conveys too much of an alliance to a one-dimensional goal. Also, I am trained as a scientist, and hence verified scientific facts are very important to my thinking. But if you mean by lobbyist someone who believed passionate in some idea, then yes, I am one.

As a girl from a very protected, cultured middle class family I went to study tropical agriculture and nutrition because I was aware of the fact that the advantages I had at birth were not due to any of my merits, and a complete coincidence. I could also have been born in Calcutta or Rio with no chance to be educated or even to eat enough. I believed as a student, and I still do today, that I have an obligation to spend my energies to try and better the lives of those who have so few opportunities. Of course, with the years, I have learnt that one’s contribution can only be very modest, and that some of the more useful things I can do, are trying to influence decision making in various arenas, even if this carries little visibility.

**Q:** Do people change behavior? Are the necessary steps done by government or industry?

**Louise Fresco:** Yes I do see changes, more awareness of issues of food security, safety and the environment, but at the same time there is also a lot of confusion and inconsistency. For example, our cars are more energy efficient, but we travel more, our appliances save energy and water, but we have more of them. Moderation in consumer behaviour, and legislation and

fiscal measures to promote moderation are the challenges of today. For that, we also need role models!

**Q:** In your recent book 'Hamburgers in Paradise' you stay close to your main topic over the years, the question, how to feed the world. You don't ban fast food or meat entirely. You seem to be optimistic that mankind might manage to feed the world and limit food production at the same time. How might this work?

**Louise Fresco:** I think there is a lot of room for improvement. For example, current cereal yields in West Africa are at about the same level as those in Europe in the Middle Ages. Our history has been one of continuous progress and we are learning from our mistakes. We are collectively better fed and more numerous than ever before and we have corrected many of the errors of overuse of chemicals. So even without recurring to still unknown or unproven technology, we can do much better still. However, hunger is not so much a problem of supply today but of purchasing power, i.e. poverty and isolation in failing states. I do not ban fast food or meat but my plea is for moderation and partial substitution (of animal proteins by plant proteins). Fast food is part of an urban culture, and the issue is more how to induce healthy consumer choices.

**Thank you and looking for lively debates in Stockholm!**